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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 2917
INFO RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHWH/WESTERN HEMISPHERIC AFFAIRS DIPL POSTS PRIORITY
RUEHROV/AMEMBASSY VATICAN PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
RUMIAAA/HQ USSOUTHCOM MIAMI FL PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 000486

SIPDIS

USSOUTHCOM ALSO FOR POLAD
DEPARTMENT PASS TO AID/OTI (RPORTER)

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/17/2029

TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL KIRF KDEM VE VT

SUBJECT: GBRV STEPS UP PRESSURE ON THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

REF: A. CARACAS 443
¶B. CARACAS 309 AND PREVIOUS

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Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR FRANCISCO FERNANDEZ,
REASON 1.4 (D)

¶1. (C) Summary: The Venezuelan Catholic Conference of Bishops (CEV) issued a highly critical April 6 communique warning that Venezuela's democratic system is "at risk of collapse". In response, President Chavez (using parallels from liberation theology) insinuated on Easter Sunday in his nationwide news column that the Catholic Church was an accomplice to the 2002 failed coup attempt. Following Chavez's lead, Government of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (GBRV) leaders called for the investigation of Church officials for alleged complicity in events surrounding the April 11, 2002 short-lived coup. The negative reaction of the GBRV to any criticism by Church leaders, and the recent burglary of CEV headquarters, are likely to further fuel the ongoing tensions between Church and State in Venezuela. End Summary.

Democracy - "At Risk for Collapse"

¶2. (SBU) The Venezuelan Catholic Conference of Bishops (CEV) expressed its growing concern for Venezuela's deteriorating human rights situation in a harshly worded April 6 communique. The communique was issued on the heals of the Church's public criticism of the April 3 harsh sentencing of 11 police officers surrounding the events of April 2002 (Ref A). During a radio interview immediately following the politicized verdict, First Vice-President of the CEV Monsignor Baltazar Porras referred to the 30-year prison sentences received by defendants as "A sad and black day for justice in Venezuela."

¶3. (SBU) The communique specifically warned that Venezuela's democratic system is "at risk for collapse" due to the concentration of power by President Chavez, increased political polarization, politicization of the judiciary, growing influence of narcotraffickers, increasing levels of violence, and the recent surge in kidnappings and assassinations.

Harsh Reaction to Criticism; CEV Robbed

¶4. (SBU) President Chavez insinuated Easter Sunday in his nationwide news column that the Catholic Church was an accomplice to the events surrounding the failed 2002 coup attempt. Chavez wrote, "On February 17, 1980, (then Salvadoran Archbishop) Romero said that a church that does not unite with the poor to denounce the injustices committed against them, is not a true church of Jesus Christ. These words define exactly what is occurring in the hierarchy of the Venezuelan (Catholic) Church, which has once again joined the powerful and those who shot and killed our people." Chavez, who frequently refers to Jesus Christ as the "first socialist," has previously attacked the Church on numerous occasions. (Reftels) April 13 Pro-Chavez Governor of Aragua, Rafael Isea, called for the investigation of Church leaders for alleged complicity in events surrounding the April 11, 2002 failed coup attempt. Note: The trial of the 11 police officers was held in Maracay, the capital of Aragua. Maracay Bishop Rafael Conde had previously referred to the region as "a seat of injustice." End Note.

¶5. (C) Also on April 13 the Caracas headquarters of the CEV was robbed by unknown assailants. According to Embassy contacts at the CEV, one laptop, two monitors, and a set of building keys were stolen. In addition, the intruders searched Church files and left the copier machine on. The extent of the information gleaned from CEV headquarters by the unknown assailants remains impossible to determine. In addition, CEV officials are expressing private concern that their offices are bugged.

¶6. (C) Comment: In the wake of Chavez's February 15 referendum victory, President Chavez is accelerating his efforts to concentrate even more power in his hands and to intimidate his critics. The credible Catholic Church remains one of the few, independent institutions capable and willing

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to criticize the authoritarian direction of the Chavez government, and therefore is likely to continue to be targeted by the GBRV. Given the harsh reaction of the GBRV to any criticism by Church leaders, coupled with this week's burglary of CEV headquarters, Embassy anticipates tension between Chavez and the Church will continue to escalate. In his attempts to counter the influence of the Roman Catholic Church, Chavez is trying to position his Bolivarian revolution to supplant the Church as Venezuela's primary moral authority. End Comment.

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